

Duxbury Clipper
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FORD'S STORE

The Night They Burned Down Ford's Store (Oct. 13, 1921)

(First of 3 articles on the Duxbury Fire Department)
By The Rev. Canon Robert Merry

The persistent ringing of Father's bedside phone in the middle of the night brought me to my senses with a bang. As Father was fire chief he always received the first call, and I knew from experience that this could only be a fire. So as I sat bolt upright in bed and cocked my ear in the direction of his bedroom I pieced together the alarming story.

It was sometime before George Josselyn, our night operator, got all the points clear. George was a dedicated worker in his switchboard room above the post office across the street from Paul Peterson's drug store, but he had a hearing problem and although he had a night bell it often took several rings to arouse him. No one minded because all decent people were in bed at 10 o'clock as they lived mostly by the sun and no one objected if George was slow.

It was clear from Father's end of the conversation that this was a serious fire, so when I called in to him he replied, "It is Ford's store and George says the report is that it is totally engulfed in flames right now. He will call Waldo Herrick to drive in No. 1 engine and I'll ride with him; he'll also get No. 2 under way with their hose cart." And as if to answer my unspoken question he added, "No use your going. The building is already a total loss and all we'll be doing is hoping to confine it."

With those words he pulled on his clothes, and grabbing his coat and hat, ran down the hill below our house to the No. 1 engine house that still stands there beside Blue Fish River Bridge. In a thrice he had the lights on and the doors open and the bell ringing. He had to ask Waldo Herrick, since he did not drive autos yet, and the little Model T (22½ Hp and 20 mpg) was the first venture of the fire department (board of fire engineers as it was then called) into the automotive field. The fire wagon was fitted with 2 50-gallon tanks of water carrying soda in solution and a quart bottle of muriatic acid with a porcelain stopper in a metal cage so arranged that when the tank was inverted the acid poured into the soda water solution producing hundreds of pounds of pressure to drive the water out through the hose and nozzle onto the fire. It was a vast improvement over the hand tubs in use up to that time in dealing with small fires.

Waldo Herrick (after whom the T. Waldo Herrick gymnasium is named) came quickly, cranked up the engine (2 lifts with the choke out full and a quick spin just the way we start our lawnmowers) and they were on their way. I remember every detail of that night as though it were yesterday. I recall opening my bedroom window, kneeling down and watching the bright red sky to the west. Few trees blocked the view all the way to Tremont St. It was a clear still chill night and I followed every yard of the journey of that valiant little fire wagon as it sped along St. George St. barking out its muffled exhaust like a mad dog. I heard it round the curve above the railroad station and bound down over the tracks with a "whump" and screech its tires as it headed onto Tremont St. and over the gentle rise to the now almost completely consumed building. I thought to myself, "What good would that little hose and those 100 gallons of soda water do to that kind of fire?"

Ford's store was an enormous affair. Perhaps the largest building in town, rivalled only by the Standish Hotel on Standish Shore that was later divided into 2 commodious houses that still stand near its site. It was the first "department store" in the U.S., then called a "general store". But it was far more than a store, it was an institution, a social center and in its heyday its influence extended far beyond Duxbury. Daniel Webster was one of its early patrons, driving over in his coach from nearby Marshfield. Many Duxburyites remember the store with profound affection. Fred Potter and Alice Potter Hoyt who summered in Duxbury at the time remember going to the store as teenagers. They recall its smells of molasses and kerosene and rum and harness polish. My brother Henry remembers stopping by the store daily on his milk route originating at North Hill to pick up a chocolate bar. He also remembers the schooners that brought rum and molasses to the store. I remember seeing old men gathering around the cracker barrel to swap stories and damn the government. Edwin Loring of Duck Hill Rd. says his older sister Elizabeth worked there under the then manager Patrick Boyle. The store is so much a part of Duxbury history that the Duxbury Rural & Historical Society is featuring it in an exhibit at the King Caesar House this summer. Paul Murphy reported on its history in the Duxbury Clipper on May 22.

Paul tells of the growth of the store, of how when the Fords wanted to expand they simply added another "el" so that it looked like a gigantic wooden telescope. The story would not be complete without a mention of what we would call the "low-key" approach to sales. Purchasing anything substantial was like qualifying for welfare. You had to prove need. There were no TV commercials or colorful newspaper inserts or pages of coupons to entice the buyer that we consider essential in contemporary